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mixed media

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local matters

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work

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web feat

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astrology

as

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mind
connections

Dances with Kids

BY SARAH TUFF

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It's Saturday morning, and Nandor and Lorand Moore are in deep negotiations with their mother, Victoria, about quitting taekwondo classes. "It's the same old thing!" says Nandor, 13. Shifting tactics, 10-year-old Lorand adds, "We're begging."

They're not lazy, addicted to television, or even anti-social. The Moore kids have found a new extracurricular activity: salsa dancing. Thanks to Victoria, who last month began offering classes for 6- to 16-year-olds at her brand-new Pine Street studio, the brothers can shake their bon bons better than Ricky Martin. While salsa music bounces off the purple, pink and lime-green walls, they show off their Cuban Walks and other solo footwork pieces, called "shines."

"Also, we're learning how to lead," says Nandor. "The girls just hang on and you push to go forward or backward. We have like 30 other girls that come Mondays and Wednesdays." Actually, they're not really girls. Word on the kid classes has been slow to spread, so the Moores practice their moves on much older women who come to SalsaLina for weekly classes with Moore. A Hungarian from Romania, she's a former ballroom dancer who switched to Latin dance a few years ago. Her cheery space is the area's newest aerobic outpost.

"The fact that the SalsaLina group actually has a studio now is great," says ballroom instructor Kevin Laddison, whose hour-long wedding workshop last summer gave me and my groom an alternative to the "hold-and-sway" approach. "There are more people dancing now than there were a year ago, mostly because there's more opportunity," he says.

Whether it's Lindy hop at the Champlain Club, Jazzercise in Williston or cha cha at a Montpelier church, these are dance hall days. In the past year, Laddison watched the student body at First Step Dance increase

from three to 45 per night; meanwhile, the actual bodies of the students are shrinking. One woman has lost 30 pounds from dancing; a 60-year-old man claims to be in the best shape of his life, thanks to a little soft-shoe shuffle.

When the Burlington bikepath freezes over, or the prices of lift tickets get too steep, cutting the rug can be the best way to battle winter's bulge. "Going to the gym, you get on a treadmill or a machine and you do your thing. It's very personal, versus dancing, you're doing it directly with other people; you make friends," says Laddison, who's seeking non-dancers for a series of promotional cable-access shows that begin filming on Saturday. Part of being a dancer is maintaining a healthy lifestyle. "You can't really dance well while you're drinking," he says. Linedancer magazine backs him up. "Never come onto the dance floor carrying drink, glasses, cans or lighted cigarettes," it suggests among etiquette tips that also include this gentle reminder: "Remember, everyone was once a beginner."

Ten years ago, Dean LeClaire was one of those beginners, taking a couple of country line-dancing classes in Isle La Motte. "Somebody told me it was all women," he says. "They were right." Now known as Dancin' Dean, LeClaire has mastered hundreds of moves, belongs to the American Callers Association and manages to wrangle a full house for his Tuesday night classes on "progressive" line dancing. Like Moore, he's trying to get more kids involved. He recently taught line dancing to some 800 students in the Champlain Islands — chicken dance for the kindergartners, hip hop for the older kids.

"There's a whole new element coming in that's more funky, the songs you hear on 95 Triple X," says Burlington's Denise Brault, a St. Michael's College employee who began line-dancing in 1999 and takes classes from LeClaire in St. Albans. "We're dancing to Maya, we're dancing to Usher, Christina Aguilera." Evolved, many claim, from prison chain gangs, line dancing has in the past four or five years shed its country chaps and shimmied into city dance clubs around the world. Instead of practicing heel hooks and hee-haws, the top performers bust moves to sophisticated sequences with names like Phloor Philla and Sexy Stir Fry. "When people think of line dancing, they think Urban Cowboy, a heel and toe thing, both hands holding your belt buckle," says LeClaire, who works the third shift at a chocolate factory when he's not filling floors. "But these are syncopated, intricate movements. The choreographers have brought in cha chas, waltzes, shags, two-steps, sambas, polkas, you name it." With the new moves, line dancing has become a workout. "Some of the dances are like doing aerobics," says Brault. "Your arms are going, your legs are going, your whole body's involved. It's also a good mental workout, learning these patterns. They say it helps with your brain synapses, memorizing." Steps include gallops, vines, hitches, kicks, touches and swivels, all pulled off at a rapid-fire pace.

"When you first learn something and then master it, it's very rewarding," says LeClaire. "You start looking for new dances that move you; it's quite addicting." Like Brault, and other Green Mountain gallopers, LeClaire often travels around New England to trade tips; but it's overseas where they're really pushing their tushes. Hong Kong, of all places, hosted the world's largest country line dance: Last December, 168 hipsters rollicked to "Baby Likes to Rock It" for more than seven minutes. Sharon McDiarmid, a Scottish homemaker, walked away from Nashville's 2002 United Country and Western Dance World Championships with the top line-dancing title.

Not so lucky was the lass who left the 2002 West Coast Salsa Congress

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with a mild concussion, two black eyes and a lump on her forehead the size of a cigar, thanks to a freak accident with an overly enthusiastic mambo dancer. Despite the serious name, salsa congresses are rambunctious, multi-day affairs of competitions and exhibitions, and nearly as popular internationally as line dancing; new events are scheduled from Turin, Italy, to Sydney, Australia.

Burlington is still not exactly Salsa Central, but it's making moves to get on the map. U.S. National Latin Dance Championship finalist David Larson has been teaching Cuban-style salsa here for five years, while Victoria Moore has introduced nightclub-inspired lessons and Friday-night socials. Top dancers from Boston and New York often travel up to SalsaLina to share their shines; this Friday, the studio's members will gather with other salsa fans at Higher Ground for a performance by Vermont's Grupo Sabor.

Also this weekend, Moore is teaching salsa dancing to Burlington schoolkids as part of the International Festival. She hopes that some of them will start showing up at SalsaLina regularly on weekends. Dancing could be part of an antidote to the current childhood obesity crisis; instead of getting jiggy, kids could be getting jiggy with it. "It's not so much the dance — it could be any dance," says Moore. "But salsa is more a social dance. You have a workout, you have the physical conditioning. But then you have the emotional connection and the confidence. The kids learn to look each other in the eye, and the workout is having fun more than anything."

It's working out for Nandor, anyway. After giving up on his last money-making scheme to breed his pet pug — "he was going to the bathroom too much" — the boy has a new business plan. "I'm going to take this studio over when she's old and crusty," says Nandor, looking around at the candy-colored walls, festooned with paper-maché chili peppers. "Though I might change the colors. I don't like pink."



contents

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for web queries: graphics@sevendaysvt.com

